

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

BREAKING DOWN DIVIDING WALLS IN THE 21st CENTURY

A week for seeking new ecumenical inspiration on Iona, September 10-16, 2005

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I approached the week on Iona with a strong feeling of being called to be present, though not knowing for what purpose I was led to be there. Some years ago I had a vision, if you will, of God's people gathered under the light of Christ, gathered as one integrated group but maintaining their individual bodies, their individuality. All races, sexes, ages were present, clearly distinguishable in that crowd, and God's love rested on them all equally. In the time preceding the Iona week this image kept returning to me, and I felt that this was an insight into how we should be living as Christ's body. Clearly, I thought, we must knock down the divisions between us to take our true, fused, united places in God.

It did not take long on Iona to discover how naïve I had been. I had come to the week thinking that all we needed to do was talk to one another and we would discover that we all worshipped the same God, so we should simply forget our differences and visibly unite. But it is in our very diversity that our strength lies. I should have paid more attention to the image I had been given. God's people are not one indistinguishable being. We have each, individually, been given gifts and treasures, unique aspects of ourselves granted to us by God. I believe each of us is uniquely precious to God, and if I believe this in each individual, can I not also see this in each denomination? The Truth of God is incomprehensible to any individual human. As I spent time hearing about how others find God, and spending time learning to truly listen to what they were saying, I began to see that we all approach God in ways that speak to our own conditions. I find God through still contemplation, but that does not mean my friend cannot find him in liturgy. How I limited God in my heart when I imagined he could only make his presence known in one form of worship!

I began to realise that being called to unity, as we are, does not mean we must lose our diversity. Unity is a process, not a goal. We have not failed to find unity if we ever disagree, ever hurt one another or judge one another wrongly. Rather, I believe, unity is found in the way we relate to one another. Although we still misunderstand each other, and cause pain in doing so, we can approach the other with faithful love, and listen to their hurt, and share our fears in return. Listening with love to the spirit in another's words can, and does, lead in itself to unity.

Our week was intended to break down the walls dividing us. How was I to take part in this process when I did not truly understand what these walls were? To understand the walls between us we had to talk to one another, to listen to one another, and to see what the wall looked like to the other person. We discovered that walls are not always negative. Sometimes, they give us the space to be who we truly are, to worship God and to know God in ways that we could not do if we were not within our own sacred spaces. This is not something we wanted to destroy, to take from one another. Rather, we had to learn to share our sacred spaces, to show them to others and risk their misunderstanding, their ridicule, in the hopes that one day we could all share our sacred spaces without fear of judgement and misinterpretation. Only by freely and joyfully opening our own space can we ask others to do the same.

My belief is that during our week on Iona we found unity amongst ourselves. No, we did not solve the problems underlying our differences, and we did not tear down all our walls. But we brought our treasures into the open and we shared them in love. We did not reach a specific goal, but we did begin the process, and that process, with God's help, will continue through each of us, in our lives, in the new ways we have learned to see God, in the new lights we can now see in our accustomed ways of worshipping God. Maybe we did not break down our dividing walls, but I believe we did turn them, in that time, in that place, into walls that could be welcoming, sheltering, rather than divisive.